

**Written by Peter I. Donegan**

[no date]

A short jetty leads out over the shelly pink sand and stands up to its ankles in the most glorious blue water you could ever imagine. Makes one wish that one could preserve its colour in crystal jars forever. The small waves swish up and fall back with a tinkle and a whirr of tiny shells – Neptune's delicate pottery, broken into a thousand fragments glinting in the blaze of the tropic sun.

At the end of this jetty, a short derrick, with creaking rusty iron work a piece or two of chain, odd scraps of rope, and beneath the swinging beam, a lugger gently rises and falls with the movement of the fast incoming tide.

On board we go, you and I, over a dipping plank to serve as a gangway, and step down over the gunwale, not quite a foot high, little enough protection in heavy weather, but then, we're not sailors, or pearl divers, we're only visitors, landlubbers, who have been invited to witness the trying-out of a new pumping outfit, installed in this little ship. We're early, so let's sit on the low rail until the crew arrive and smoke a cigarette.

Here they are now, sturdy Japs in white duck trousers and sweaters or singlets, sandals and pith helmets. A white man, the engineer responsible for the working of the engine and gear, a couple of dark fellows carrying a coiled hose, rope, diving dress and helmet, a canvas kit bag, a dozen bottles of beer in a case, and a block of ice in a bag.

There is much talking in a strange tongue, much of it, the engine starts somewhere below, in, or under a hatch, a bucket is produced from another hatch, the ice is smashed into the bucket, and the bottles disposed therein. Off we go, with a slight trembling of the ship, and a lazy plunging of the bow, and purring of the engine, between clumps of mangroves, floating their leaves on the magic blue water.

Past other boats at anchor, our cameras click, black Broome luggers with a white painted strip at the water line, their large registration numbers on either side, BN, and a number and their names, Heather, or Elsie or Marie on the stern.

Now, just look back at the township of Broome. Let your eyes run across the creamy wake, churned by our movement, to a pink beach, red sand hills, white roofs and green trees, dashed with the red of the Poinciana flower, and over all, the hot sun, and the blue sky, and the horizon rimmed round with tumbled clouds, grey-white and low down the ever-present cockeye clouds.

Now the real object of our trip. The water is deep – some twenty feet or more – deep, if you consider that at this very spot, just six hours before, you and I were wading in six inches of water gathering shells and we are now half a mile off shore.

And while we've been soaking up this colour, and clicking our cameras at it – in vain – as we find later on – the little yellow chaps and the engineer have been getting on with the job. The engine works well – the pump is perfect and one of the boys is preparing to do down. He strips down to shorts and singlet, then from the kit bag come long woollen



stockings, right to the thigh – then a woollen shirt, long sleeves and tight fitting and low waisted – more stockings, more shirts, stockings and shirts and stockings – it's cold after an hour below. He is assisted into the rubberized canvas outer suit, huge leaden soled boots strapped on, a brass corselet affair bolted over his shoulders – then down onto the rungs of a short rope ladder trailing by the side of the boat, his arms hanging into ?? and supporting him. Next a half hundred weight of lead on his back and again on his chest in flat lumps, slung on hooks and tied round his waist. His hands are ?? having been soaped and forced thro' the narrow rubber cuffs of the suit. And all this time they're talking and laughing and consuming iced beer. 'Have beer, Mistah?' 'Thanks boy, certainly'. Now the next thing is the helmet a large copper dome with a circular window at each side and one in front. To this is connected the air hose and a twist secures the dome to the suit. The diver issues his instructions thro' the front hole, as yet unscrewed – is then closed up – everything is checked over, there is a splash and a hissing and bubbling of air and froth, and the bulbous, goggling figure sinks slowly in a flurry of foam. Bubbles come up from the end of the trailing air hose, indicting the position of the diver. More bubbles – lots of them – a commotion on the surface – the straightening out of the air line and the grotesque monstrous figure shoots waist high out of the water in a spout of his own making. Blown up and distended he waves a signal to the boat and slowly sinks with a gurgling hiss. And in our excitement we forgot our cameras.

'Drink, Mistah?' 'Yes, thanks, certainly'. To think that these men do it regularly and think nothing of it. Why, our own hearts are thumping with the thrill of it.

Up comes our man – is hauled aboard and divests himself of his cumbrous suit. Beer is consumed. 'Yes, thanks'. Another boy gets ready. In the meantime the lugger circles slowly, gulls wheel round the dipping masts overhead, the sun beats hotter and the blue is more intense.

This boy goes down, comes up, reports all is well, the air is cool, he says and only slightly smelling of oil. This is thirsty weather, and what fun this is, to sit on the rail, and sway with the ship, watch before our eyes this really remarkable evidence of man's efforts to rifle the treasure chest of Nature.

Well, now we're going home. It's been a great afternoon. What? Me go down? Hell no. What? Only 10 ft of water. Well, anyhow, it would make a good photo to send home. Mother's only son – in deep sea diving suit! What a struggle to slip my hands thro' the cuffs. Well, now I am going down. The suit is clammy inside – has been leaking slightly. I am perspiring profusely. Try anything once. Over the side and onto the ladder. All I have to do is to leave the ?? on the side of the head piece open till I reach the bottom, then slowly close it until the pressure is enough to keep the pressure of the water from squeezing me in the suit. I am receiving final instructions thro' the circular hole in front of my face. My own voice is loud and tinny in this dome – like shouting in a cave, you know the sort of cave that you go into, can't find the entrance. Where all the crew were just mildly interested before, they are keen now. I receive instructions from all of them in their respective mother tongue – with much sign language thrown in. Just grin and look as tho' I like all this. I feel that it is almost an international situation. If I had a small Union Jack in one hand and the Blue Ensign in the other, I'd wave them as I sank.



Now the glass window is screwed up with a final sort of clang. Two sharp taps on the helmet and I'm to let go and jump. All right, I'll be all right. Perspiration trickles into my eyes and I attempt to brush it away with my left hand. Horror! I can't! Then, tap, tap – and I let go all hold and go over backwards with a splash that I can see and not hear. For all I can hear is the rush and hiss of the air in the helmet in one side and out the other. I wonder if I'm getting enough, and breath deep, long breaths of warmish mechanical air. But why aren't I sinking? Here I am, like some bloated monster, blimping against the side of the boat, on my back and looking out of my window about 2" above my nose – seem to see the gesticulating hands and mouthing grinning faces of all the Japs in the world – like those curious Oriental pictures, that you can hang upside down and never know the difference. Now I'm off – downwards – slowly, slowly, slowly – am upright now, right hand on the valve – tense, my heart going like a hammer. The loveliest feeling in the world I'm sure – can't hear – can't speak to anyone and now, can't see anyone – only the black bottom of the black hull thro' the pale green translucence, fading slowly away overhead. The words of the more or less popular ditty ?? thro' my (by now) aching head, 'So take your last look, at sunshine and brook'. I know now how Alice in Wonderland felt when she tumbled down the rabbit burrow. Indeed I do feel so queer', and how a novice parachute jumper would feel.

All this takes time to write – it happened much quicker. The only indication of my downward motion was the apparent upward movement of the tiny particles of sand – small submarine dust before my eyes, and all the while the light fading – from the green of a peeled grape to a heavy pressing sense[?] darkness – and my legs and body were as tho' in the ever increasing clutch of an enveloping closing [?] pain – the water pressing inward on the suit. I reach the bottom with a gentle bump – the movement of the particles ceases – I am way down in the depths of the dark green ocean – all ten feet of them – alone. But all this time I have been saying to myself, over and over – 'frontwards to close – back to open'. With my right hand on the valve – now is the time. Frontwards to close – but nothing seems to happen, except that the roaring gets louder and the blood pumps in my ears. How they ache. Then the particles move down, my leaden feet leave the bottom, faster and faster, the light becomes increasingly paler. What the hell? Whoosh – and I'm up and out, waist high – there's the boat and the gesticulating crew. The sun and the waves, but I can't see them, for I'm lying face down, and feet down, being ignominiously towed aboard, the seat of the suit well inflated like a large grey balloon. Up on the ladder with a heave on the rope, more hands and faces thro' my windows. 'Come on, someone – undo me quick' Off comes the front glass with a rattle – one long gasp of fresh air and voices, laughing and noisy at my expense.

'You closed the valve too quick', they tell me. Well, I know that now. Let's get out of it. 'Try it more gradually this time' This time? Help! With a head like mine? The front cover is on again. Tap, tap, tap on the dome. And down, down, down – all over again. With the same lost feeling and the same splitting headache. They thought I wanted to stop down there – how absolutely wrong of those sturdy Japs – how wrong. Even if I'd sunk for the last time with my little flags waving in each hand, they might never have guessed just why I accepted their unwitting challenge. So now, I think that you and I could do with some refreshment. 'Yours? "Oh, thanks".